BC Women's Programs

SINGLE PARENT FAMILIES IN BRITISH COLUMBIA
FOCUS ON WOMEN

Researched With Assistance from the
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Ministry of Industry and Small Business Development

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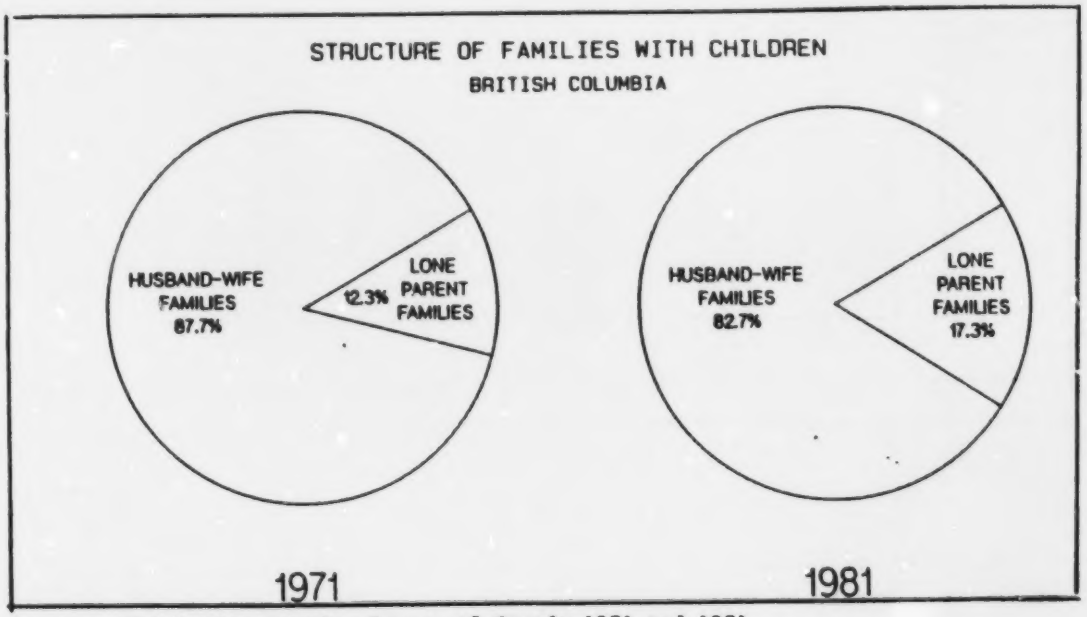
CHANGING TRENDS IN FAMILY STRUCTURE IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

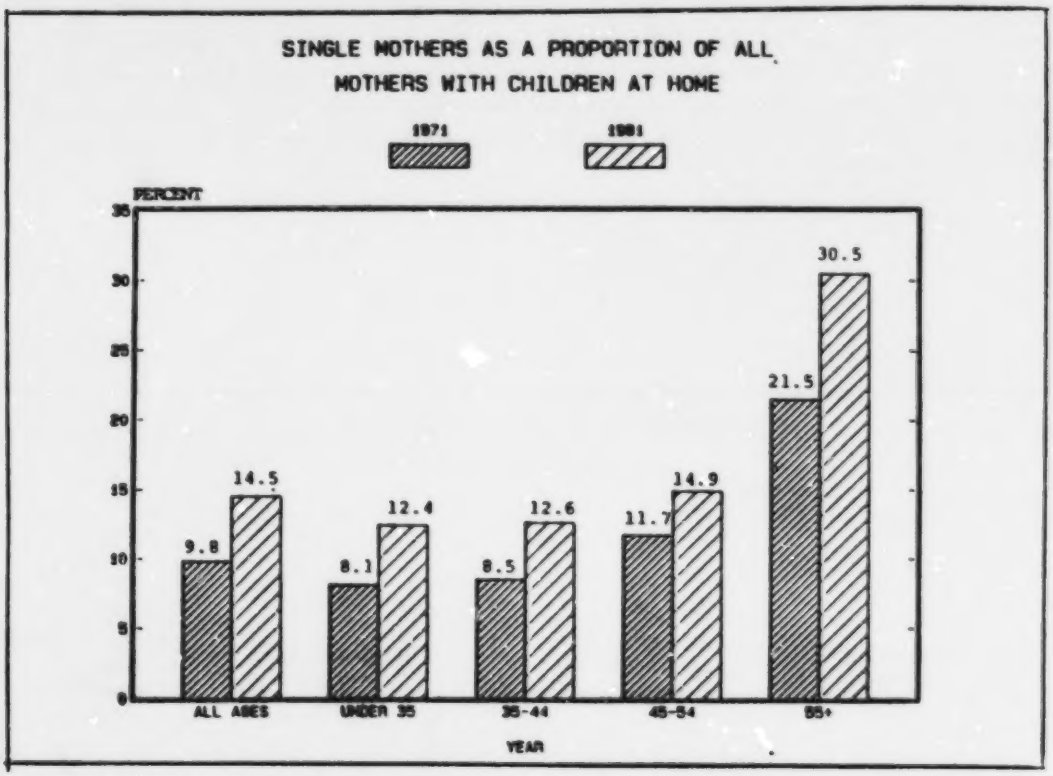
Recently, much attention has been focused on the single parent family.* The census of Canada conducted in 1971 and 1981 revealed a significant change in the structure of the family unit over the decade. In British Columbia the number of single parent families almost doubled from 43,170 to 78,690. In 1971, one family in eight was headed by a single parent; this had increased to one in six by 1981. This paper focuses on the demographic, social and economic status of single parent families in British Columbia, with particular emphasis on the single mother.



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Canada 1971 and 1981

* The category of single parent family includes all families with children headed by a woman or a man who is neither married nor living in a marriage-type relationship.

Among single parent families, approximately 82% are headed by women. The trend of more women living alone with their children extends across all age groups, but has grown at the fastest rate among mothers under 35 years of age, rising from 8.1% to 12.4% of the population. By 1981, 36%, or nearly 23,000 of all single mothers were found in this younger age group.



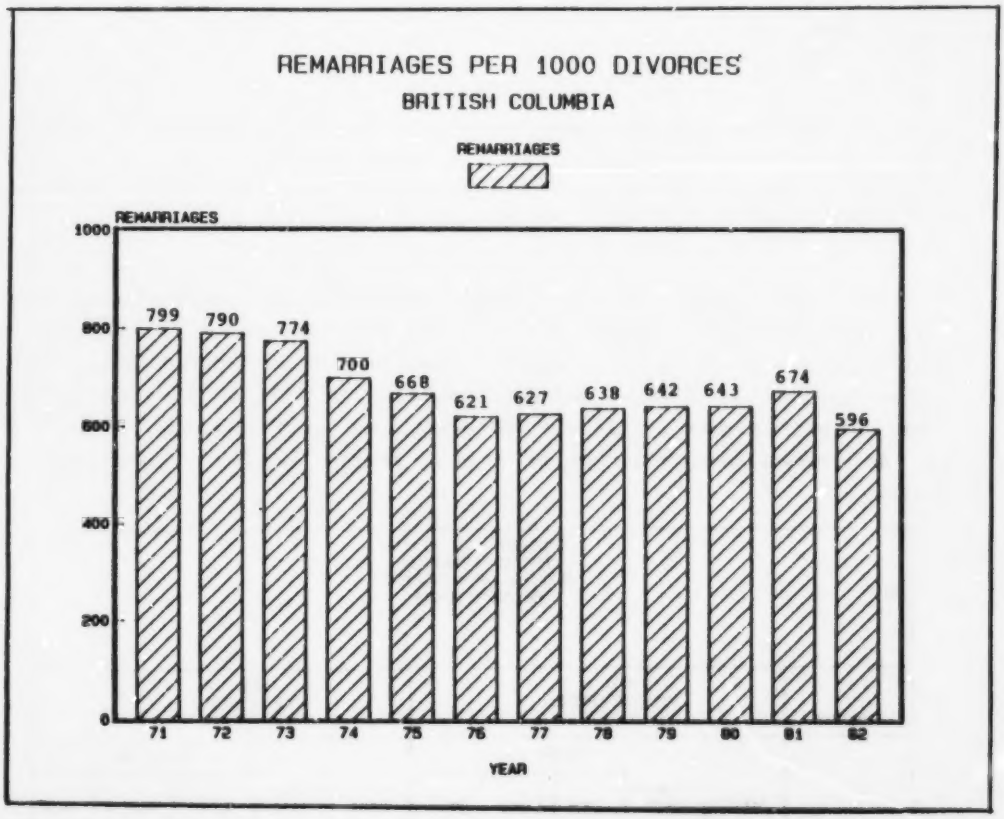
Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Canada, 1971 and 1981

This dramatic increase (1.9 times over the decade) in the number of single mothers is a result of several factors. Firstly, there has been an overall increase in the number of women of child bearing age - in 1981 there were 1.3 times as many women with children living at home as in 1971. Of further significance is the doubling of the number of divorced and separated mothers and the large increase (2.5 times) of mothers who had never been married.

MARITAL STATUS OF SINGLE MOTHERS BRITISH COLUMBIA			
	1971	1981	Increase 1971 to 1981
Never Married	2,355	5,960	2.5 times
Marriage Breakdown	21,495	43,175	2.0 times
Separated	13,505	22,420	1.7 times
Divorced	7,990	20,755	2.6 times
Widowed	9,545	15,040	1.6 times
TOTAL	33,395	64,175	1.9 times

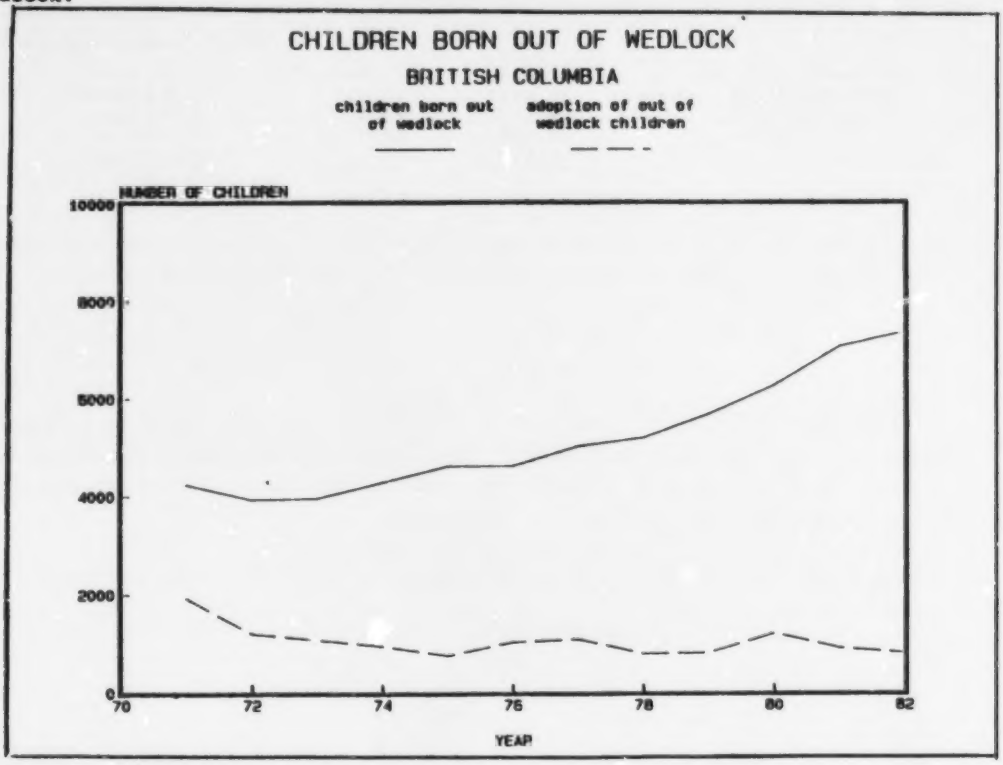
Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Canada, 1971 and 1981

More current data on vital statistics shows that the trend of increasing numbers of single mothers is likely to continue. The rate of divorces has been going up, while the rate of remarriages has not kept pace. In 1982, for every 1000 divorces, there were only 600 remarriages.



Source: Vital Statistics, Province of British Columbia, Ministry of Health

Furthermore, despite the widespread availability of birth control devices, the number of children born out of wedlock has been increasing. At the same time, never-married mothers are less likely to give up their children as can be seen from the steady decline in the number of adoptions of children born out of wedlock.



Source: Vital Statistics, Province of British Columbia, Ministry of Health

The most profound result of these demographic and social changes in family structure has been a considerable increase in the number of children living with only one parent. Their number jumped by almost 4 percentage points from 11 percent of all British Columbia children in 1971 to 15 percent in 1981. Some 130,000 of this province's children lived with only one parent in 1981, and an overwhelming majority of them - nearly 108,000 - lived with their mother.

CHILDREN LIVING AT HOME
BY FAMILY STRUCTURE
1971 AND 1981 COMPARISON
BRITISH COLUMBIA

Categories	1971 TYPE OF FAMILY					1981 TYPE OF FAMILY				
			Single Parent					Single Parent		
	Total	Husband-Wife	Total	Female	Male	Total	Husband-Wife	Total	Female	Male
Number Children	826,450	736,055	90,395	69,985	20,410	884,775	753,260	131,515	107,940	23,575
Average Number Per Family	2.4	2.4	2.1	2.1	2.1	1.9	2.0	1.7	1.7	1.6
Percentage of Total Children	100%	89.1%	10.9%	8.4%	2.5%	100%	85.1%	14.9%	12.2%	2.7%

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Canada, 1971 and 1981

FAMILY INCOME IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

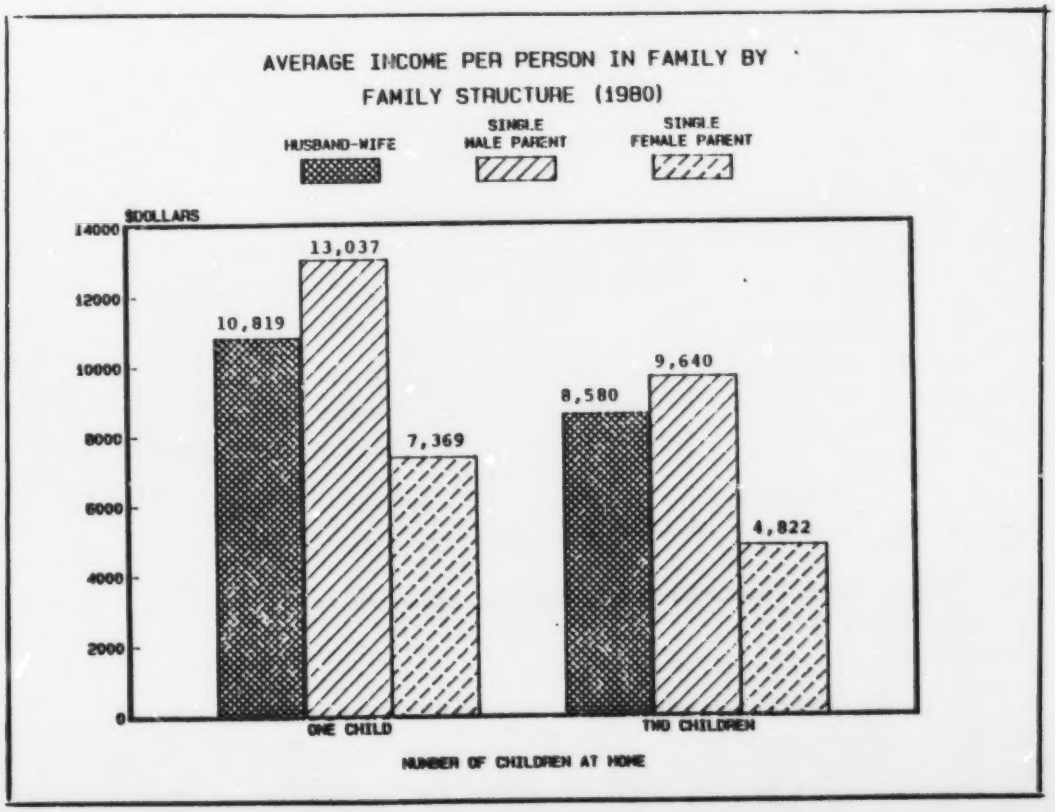
A significant feature of the changes in the structure of families is that single parent families, particularly those headed by women, are usually found amongst the lowest income groups. In 1970, single mother families had an average income of $5,265, which was less than one half the income level of $11,236 of the average husband-wife family. Over the decade they fell even further behind with income rising 2.7 times, compared to the increase achieved by the husband-wife family of 3.0 times. By 1980, the single mother's family income was only 42.1% of the income of the husband-wife family.

AVERAGE INCOME OF B.C. FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN AT HOME

Categories	1970	1980
Husband-Wife Families	$11,236	$33,904
Single Mother Families	$ 5,265	$14,274
Income Ratio of Single Mother Family to Husband/Wife Family	46.9%	42.1%

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Canada, 1971 and 1981

This comparison may be unfair because the husband-wife family tends to be larger than the single mother family. When adjusted for family size, the single mother family still falls short of that of the husband-wife family, and the more children in the family, the greater the gap. In 1980, income per person in a single mother family with two children was under $5,000.



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Canada, 1981

The reasons for this gap are numerous, the prime one being that women, in general, earn less than men. In 1980, a woman working full-time and full year earned on average $0.62 for every $1.00 earned by a man similarly employed. Another important factor, and certainly the main contributor to the widening of the income gap, is the rapidly rising labour force participation rate of married women. More and more frequently, both husband and wife are income earners and the wife's contribution pulls their average income upwards. In 1971, among husband-wife families with children 33% showed both spouses employed, and by 1981 that figure had climbed to 51%. It would also seem that single male parents are doing much better than their female counterparts, although the dual income family has affected them too.

An additional factor in the income gap is the relatively high incidence of the single mother family in which no member is in the labour force - 23% compared to only 2% of husband/wife families. The average income for this group of families is extremely low - which pulls the overall single mother's average down.

AVERAGE INCOME OF FAMILIES WHOSE CHILDREN DO NOT WORK
BY FAMILY STRUCTURE
1980
BRITISH COLUMBIA

Type of Family	Average Family Income		
	Mother in Labour Force	No one in Labour Force	
Single mother	$11,902	$6,849	
	Husband Only In Labour Force	Husband & Wife In Labour Force	No One In Labour Force
Husband-Wife	$28,213	$33,272	$18,916

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Canada, 1981

There is some controversy in Canada about what constitutes poverty. Level of income, by itself, is not a definitive measure of poverty, as the cost of living can vary considerably between families and also between urban and rural areas. For example, a single mother earning $12,000 per year with one child and the owner of a mortgage free home would be well off in comparison to a similar family with the same income, but living in rented accommodation, paying $500 a month to a landlord. Rural areas are generally less expensive to live in than cities, primarily due to lower housing costs. Also, the size of the family has an impact on a family's standard of living. In examining these factors Statistics Canada provides what are termed "low income cutoffs". On the average, families with incomes falling below these cut-offs are considered to be living in poverty. An example of low income cut-offs for 1982 is given below:

LOW INCOME CUT-OFFS OF FAMILY UNITS, 1982, CANADA

	Size of area of residence				
	Urban areas				Rural areas
	500,000 and over	100,000-499,999	30,000-99,999	Less than 30,000*	
Size of family unit	$	$	$	$	$
1 person	8,914	8,466	7,941	7,342	6,592
2 persons	11,761	11,162	10,414	9,663	8,615
3 persons	15,732	14,909	13,934	12,961	11,537
4 persons	18,129	17,229	16,107	14,982	13,336
5 persons	21,126	20,002	18,654	17,379	15,507
6 persons	23,073	21,800	20,377	18,953	16,930
7 or more persons	25,396	24,047	22,475	20,901	18,654

* Includes cities with a population between 15,000 and 30,000 and small urban areas (under 15,000).

Source: Statistics Canada, Survey of Consumer Finances, 1983

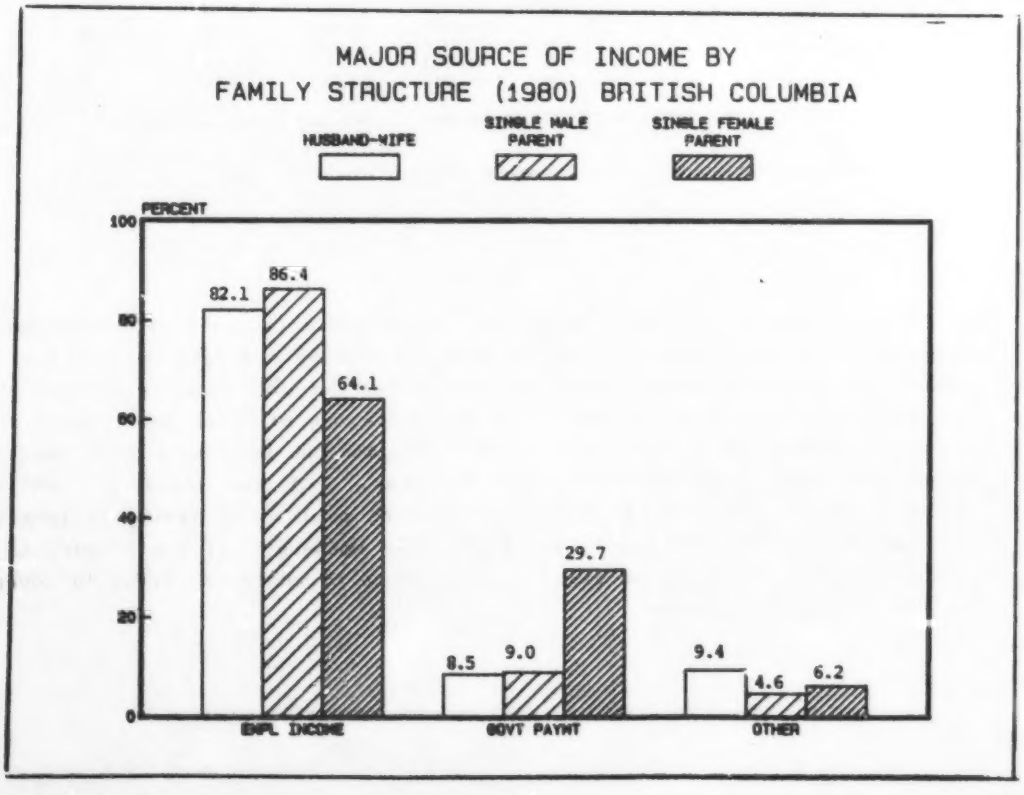
The incidence of poverty among British Columbia families with children is illustrated below: single parent families headed by a female show by far the highest incidence of being below the low income cut-off. Nearly half of them fell into that category in 1982. In fact, one out of three poor families in British Columbia is headed by a woman, despite the fact that such families constitute only one-twelvth of all families. Of the province's 649,000 children, 17.6% (or 114,000 children) could be said to be living in poverty, and 43% (or 49,000) of them live with single mothers. If the proportion of single mothers continues to rise, the incidence of children living in poverty is also likely to increase.

INCIDENCE OF LOW INCOME AMONG FAMILIES
BY FAMILY CHARACTERISTICS AND SELECTED STATISTICS,
FOR BRITISH COLUMBIA, 1982 INCOME YEAR

Family Characteristics	Families		Children		
	Total No. of Families ('000)	Incidence Below the Low Income Cut-Off	Total No. of Children ('000)	Incidence Below The Low Income Cut-Off	Number Below Low Income Cut-Off ('000)
1. Married Couples Only	268	7.5%	0	0	0
2. Married Couples With Never-married Children Only	367	8.8%	518	11.4%	59
3. Single Parent Families - Female Head	65	48.2%	79	61.5%	49
4. All Other Families	63	15.9%	52	13.5%	7
TOTAL	762	12.2%	649	17.6%	114

Source: Statistics Canada, Survey of Consumer Finances - 1983, Unpublished Data.

The chart below shows the extent to which the single mother depends on government transfer payments such as Income Assistance, Unemployment Insurance, Canada Pension Plan and Old Age Security. Almost 30% of single mothers claimed some form of government transfer payment as their major source of income in 1980. A corresponding figure for husband-wife families is approximately 8.5%, and this figure includes a large number of elderly couples who rely primarily on CPP and OAS.



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Canada, 1981

In the 1970's - a time of relative economic prosperity in British Columbia - the proportion of the total population requiring government income assistance declined from 6.2% in 1971 to 4.5% in 1981. Among dual parent families the proportion on income assistance fell drastically from 1.3% to .7%. On the other hand, the decline in the incidence amongst single parents was negligible from 30.8% to 28.7%, indicating that the health of the economy is not a major factor in determining this group's dependency on government assistance.

GOVERNMENT INCOME ASSISTANCE CASELOADS
BRITISH COLUMBIA

Year	Single Parent Family		Dual Parent Family	
	Number	Incidence*	Number	Incidence*
1971	13,311	30.8%	9,600	1.3%
1981	22,587	28.7%	5,570	.7%

* Percent of Total Families in this Category on Government Income Assistance

Source: Annual Report, British Columbia Ministry of Human Resources and Census of Canada

EDUCATION AND LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION OF SINGLE PARENT FAMILIES

The educational profile of the single mother is very similar to that of the married mother. Approximately 31% of all single mothers, compared to 32% of all married mothers, have completed some form of post-secondary training, ranging from a trade certificate to a university degree.

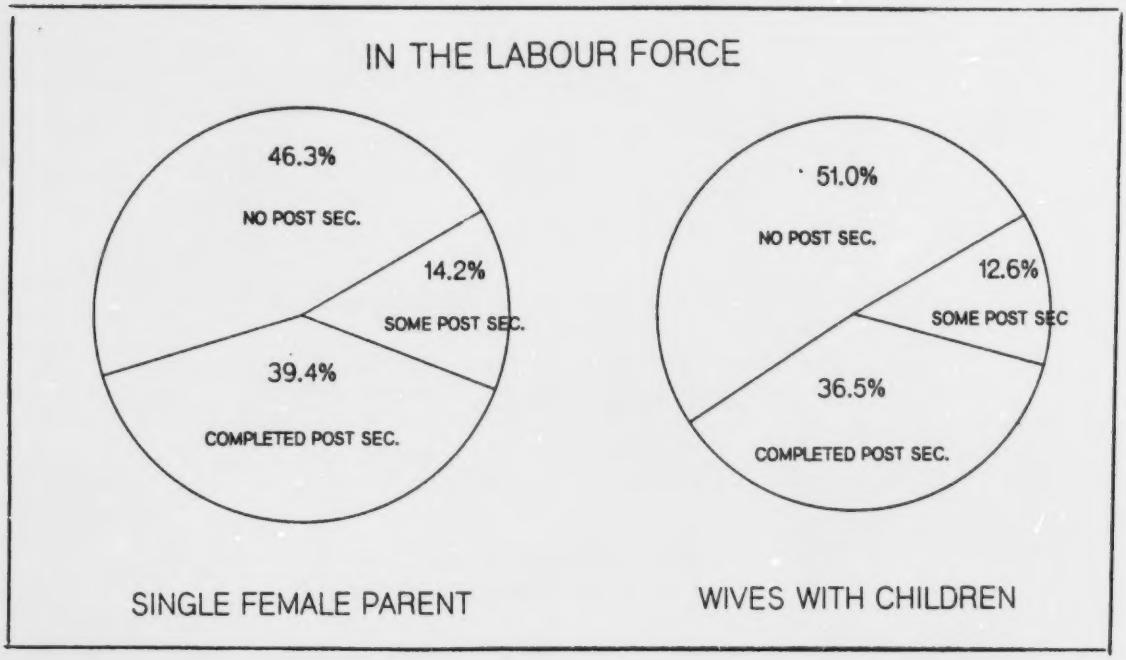
EDUCATION PROFILES OF WOMEN
WITH CHILDREN LIVING AT HOME
COMPARISON BY FAMILY STRUCTURE
1981 BRITISH COLUMBIA

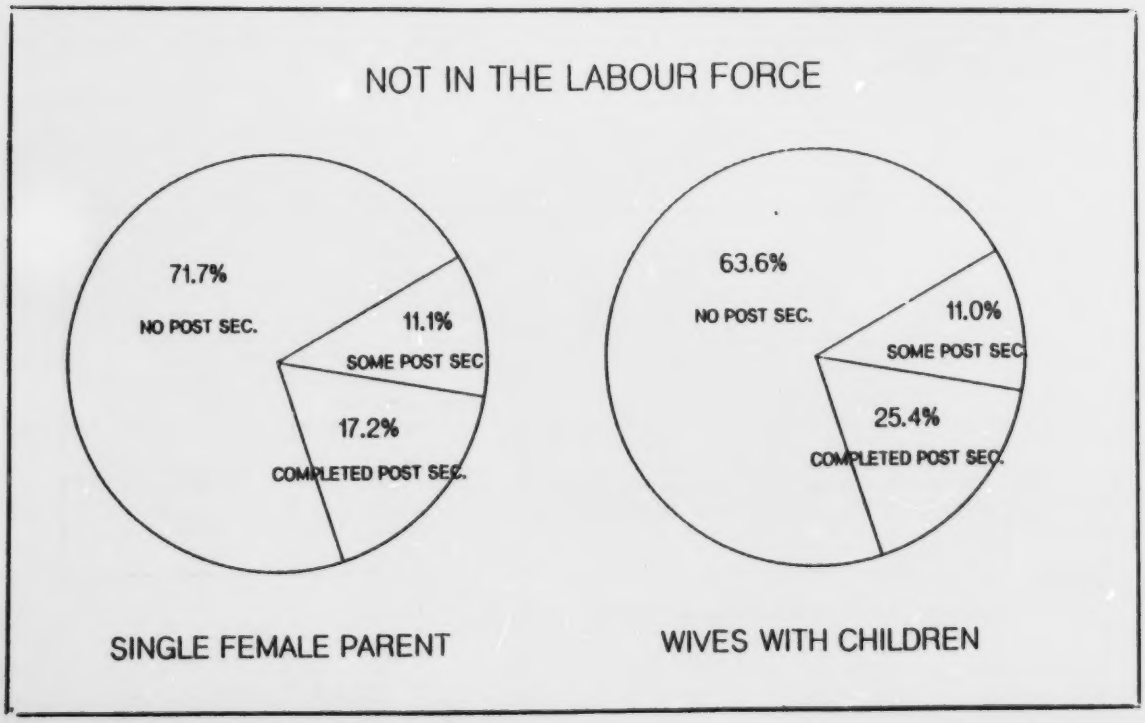
Education Level	Percent Distribution	
	Single Mother	Married Mother
No Post Secondary Training	55.8	56.8
Incomplete Post Secondary Training	13.0	11.0
Complete Post Secondary Training	31.1	32.2
All	100.0	100.0

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Canada, 1981

However, there is an enormous discrepancy in the educational profile of single mothers who are in the labour force and those who are not in the labour force. The standard of education of single mothers who are not in the workforce is extremely low - more than seven out of ten have no formal post-secondary training.

EDUCATION PROFILES OF MOTHERS
WITH CHILDREN AT HOME 1981



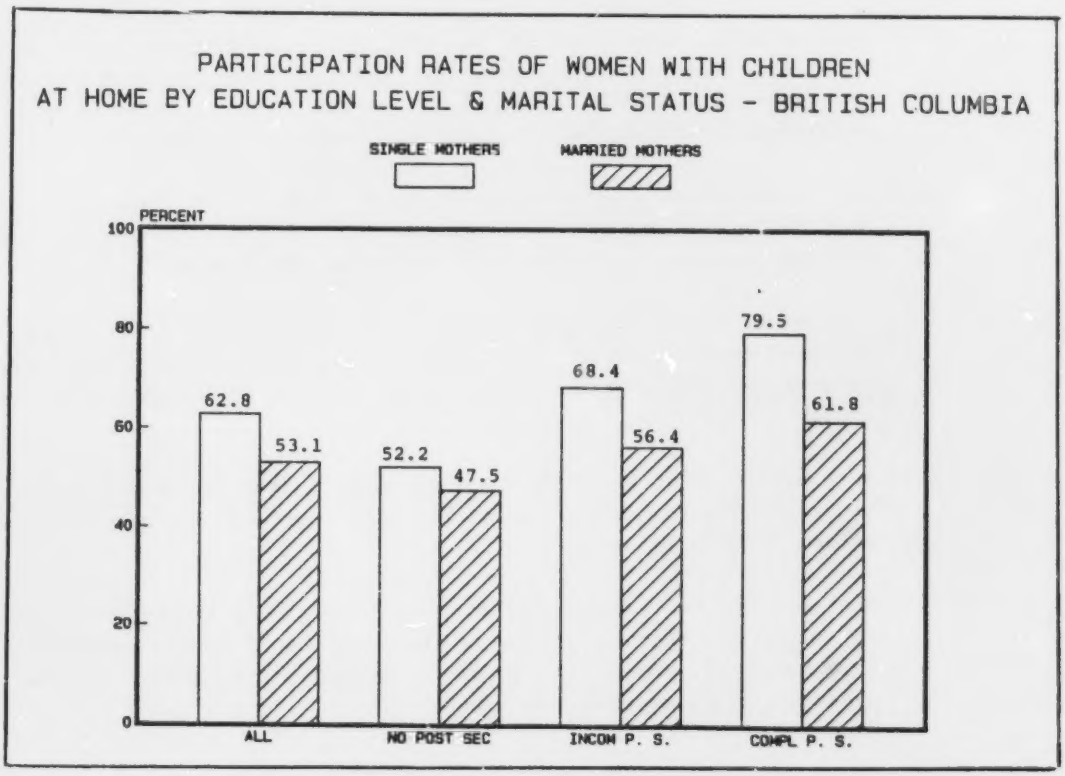


Source: Census of Canada, 1981

Data on the educational level of the single mother on government income assistance is not available, but from the above chart one can deduce that a large majority would have no post-secondary training. The earnings potential of this group in 1980 was very low - $7,263 for the non high school graduate and $8,825 for the high school graduate with no further training.

At all educational levels, the single mother is far more inclined to participate in the labour market than her counterpart married mother, but the difference is more exaggerated amongst more highly educated women.

Almost 80 percent of single mothers with post-secondary qualifications are working in the labour market. Married mothers will often have the economic option to remain at home with their children. As a result, even married mothers with post-secondary training are less likely to be in the labour market (61.8 percent) than single mothers regardless of educational level (62.8 percent). Most single mothers have no choice but to enter the labour market or else resort to government assistance.



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Canada, 1981

A single mother with little education and few skills has little economic incentive to get to work. For example, a minimum wage earner ($3.65 per hour), working full time for a full year with two weeks holiday pay, could earn $6,650 annually, whereas a single mother with one child would receive a maximum of $7,680 direct payments on income assistance. When child care costs are taken into account, it may not be practical to have the unskilled single mother join the labour force, particularly if the job requirements have adverse impact on the dependent children. But, if her educational qualifications could be upgraded, so that she could earn enough to pull her family out of poverty, it may be advisable for society to invest in the training of the single mother.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The statistics in this report outline the changes in family structure in British Columbia. At the same time, they reflect the redistribution of income among families and the widening income gap between single parent families and two parent families, and the corresponding increase in the number of children living with one parent, often on inadequate incomes. Given these trends, the following policy implications are suggested:

1. Psychological, social and economic impact on children growing up with a single parent and the need for the existence of a supportive infrastructure which would enable these children to develop in a way compatible with accepted norms of family life in Canada.

2. Impact on children growing up in families on income assistance and not having successful role models in terms of life style and personal development; the nature of the welfare syndrome.

3. The need for a suitable support system (affordable and decent housing, daycare, after school care, summer camps) for the thousands of working mothers who are making ends meet by participating in the labour force.

4. An examination of the issue of child support from the absent parent, including how to achieve equitable support arrangements, and how to enforce support payments.

5. The cost-benefit analysis of long-term government income assistance to unskilled single mothers on the one hand, versus government investment in education and skill upgrading of these employment disadvantaged parents on the other.